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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000381

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/21/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PROP](#) [PTER](#) [SA](#) [SCUL](#)
SUBJECT: JEDDAH BUSINESSMAN: IRAN ESTABLISHING GRASSROOTS
NETWORK IN KSA TO COUNTER US ATTACK

Classified By: Tatiana C. Gfoeller reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY: During a recent meeting with ConGenoff, a Jeddah businessman and former International Visitors Program participant claimed that he had been approached by representatives of the Iranian government to participate in a new strategic media initiative to foment anti-US sentiment in the GCC, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Al Sairi stated that the well-coordinated campaign was part of a larger drive to develop a pro-Iranian "fifth column" within the Kingdom, both to extend Iran's influence in the region and to create a network of supporters that could be called upon to serve as "mujahedeen" in the event of a US attack on Iran. He cited recent moves by the Iranian government to downplay the long-standing Sunni-Shi'a rivalry as the opening shot of this public campaign. END SUMMARY

CREATING A FIFTH COLUMN OF IRANIAN SUPPORT

12. (S) Jeddah businessman Meshari Al Sairi (please strictly protect) called ConGenoff to his office on May 20 to disclose that he had been approached by representatives of the Iranian government to assist in a new strategic media initiative to foment anti-US sentiment in the GCC, with specific emphasis on Saudi Arabia. A former journalist and participant in a 2002 USG-sponsored International Visitors Program to the US, Al Sairi said that he subsequently left journalism out of frustration at the self-censorship and lack of creativity in the Saudi news media. He also claimed that he had been arrested in 2004 on the orders of Minister of the Interior Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz Al Saud after criticizing the Ministry for not providing adequate accommodations and food for its employees in the Hejaz (the Western part of Saudi Arabia, of which Jeddah is the "capital.") Al Sairi stated, however, that his interest in establishing his own economic newspaper is well-known and presumably accounts for the alleged approach by Iranian envoys.

13. (S) According to Al Sairi, Iran's campaign is aimed at supplanting US influence in the region with its own. An overt and well-coordinated public diplomacy program would include the placement of anti-US articles in the regional Arabic-language press; the production of documentary films detailing US "atrocities" in Iraq, Afghanistan, and

Palestine; and SMS broadcasts to mobile phones describing the US "crusade" against Islam. Al Sairi said the Iranians who approached him had asked him to produce some of these materials.

14. (S) In addition to generating anti-US sentiment in the region, Al Sairi said these steps are designed to create a network of supporters that Iran could draw on to serve as "mujahedeen" in the country's defense following a US invasion. He drew a comparison with the groups of Arab men who flocked to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet Union in the 1980s. When ConGenoff reminded Al Sairi that the Afghan "mujahedeen" had received US and SAG assistance that proved essential to their struggle against the Soviets (assistance from the latter which would presumably not be available in the event of an armed conflict between the US and Iran), he remarked that the aim of Iran's outreach campaign in the Kingdom would be to create a ground swell of public support for fellow Muslims that the SAG would be unable restrain.

15. (S) Al Sairi also noted that the Iranian government had obtained access to a list of dual US-Saudi nationals in the Kingdom and would undertake efforts to find those who felt they had not been treated as full citizens by the USG. Though vague, the implication was that these people would be vulnerable to Iranian coercion and would conceivably be used as a "fifth column," even in the US.

DOWNPLAYING SECTARIAN DIFFERENCES

16. (S) Al Sairi said that a critical element in the success of such a campaign would be the Iranian government's ability to downplay the long-standing Sunni-Shi'a rivalry. He

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claimed that the Iranian envoys he met were aware of this and planned to de-emphasize any sectarian disputes as part of the initiative. Al Sairi indicated that Iran had instructed several Shi'a Imams in Iraq and Saudi Arabia to set aside their differences with Sunnis in the interests of fighting their "common enemy," namely the US. He also alleged that Iran's encouragement for Moqtada Al Sadr to moderate his position vis-a-vis Iraqi Sunnis was an example of this posture.

17. (S) COMMENT: Given that Al Sairi would not disclose any details on the Iranians who had approached him, it is difficult to assess the credibility of his claims and equally unclear if he is trying to convey a message on behalf of a third-party or is, as he said, trying to repay a debt to the USG for having sent him to the US in 2002. He does, however, deny any interest in working for either "side" in the US-Iran conflict, and it is unclear what he would have to gain from such a discussion with a low-ranking Consulate staff member.
END COMMENT

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

18. (C) Born in 1977, Meshari Al Sairi received a bachelor's degree in journalism from King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah in 1999. He subsequently worked for the Jeddah-based daily "Okaz" and, later, "Al Watan" and "Al Iqtisadia." He visited the US in 2002 for a USG-sponsored International Visitor's Program to examine American media coverage of the Middle East and explore the interaction between press and politics in the US, including a week studying state and local political processes in Arkansas. Hailing from an upper-middle class family, Al Sairi left journalism in 2003 to become the chairman of Roushn Al Arabia Holding Company, with ownership over a construction firm, a chain of beauty salons, a stock market investment group, and a variety of real estate holdings.

